

THE PLAY

Synopsis

War is brewing on the edge of Europe. The former Soviet Republic of Kavkhazia is experiencing trouble with a separatist region known as Drozhdania. Edgar's play swings back and forth between the negotiating table to the Warzone continually exploring a concept in game theory called The Prisoner's Dilemma.

The play begins at the University of Santa Cruz in the wake of the disintegration of communism in Eastern Europe. The setting here is a seminar exploring the limitations of international diplomacy and conflict resolution. A group of participants, from students to professors, attempt to overcome a hypothetical impasse that seems to be facing many nations, from Israel and Palestine to many of the Soviet Union's breakaway Republics, particularly those in the Caucasus. Presiding over the seminar is Tom Rothman, an American professor. However, the Kavkhaz/Drozhdan conflict is also presaged by the introduction of two additional scholars, Al Bek and Nikolai Shubkin.

Our next scene jumps forward in time eight years, to war-torn Kavkhazia. Members of the Drozhdan separatists movement discuss what to do with a prisoner they have captured. After overcoming the language barrier between them, the separatists, led by Kelima Bejta, debate what is to be done with this potential Kavkhaz spy. After threatening to electrify his genitals, Kelima decides that, as opposed to torturing/killing him and making a martyr, they will instead give him a message to carry back to Kavkhazian leadership.

Two months later, the action transfers to Finland and the home to Gina Olsson, who has arranged for Kavkhar and Drozhdan negotiators to meet and come to some form of agreement, at least in terms of a statement of shared principles that can lead to further negotiations. However, talks are rocky as the negotiators are quickly hung up on basic concepts such as the language of the declaration, arrangement of the talks, and the role of the Finnish facilitators in the talks as well. As the talks drag on, and at the last minute, a compromise document is reached. However, it turns out that one side has been consulting with their home government, something which was to be forbidden by the outline of these talks. However, agreement is reached and the declaration is ready.

Six months later, in Geneva, Patterson Davis is making arrangements for the formal signing of the Kavkhar/Drozhdan peace accords. Though Finland spearheaded the negotiations, the signing was moved to Switzerland to ensure that the signatories would be able to pronounce the name of the statement. However, at the last minute, the Declaration is scrapped as the tenuous ceasefire between Drozhdan and Kavkhar has been violated. However, in holding with the carefully stage-managed nature of the conference, the violation of the cease fire has also been carefully orchestrated by the Kavkhar government.

The second act begins at a military checkpoint in Drozhdania. The government is blocking the delivery of a shipment of medical supplies from an aid organization due to the Drozhdan authority holding a number of ethnic Kavkhar families prisoner. When a Kavkhar family is brought to the checkpoint in return for the medical supplies, it turns out that the prisoners are really Drozhdan fighters set on overrunning the checkpoint! In the fighting, one of the aid workers is killed and the Kavkhar army calls in an airstrike.

Two months later, aboard the USS Idaho, Drozhdan and Kavkhar officials have been pulled together for more talks and Gina Olsson has been brought in to assist. However, sick of being isolated from one another and unable to talk, the Kavkhar president comes to the Drozhdani and offers full partition of the country, something which amounts to the "second worst deal for everybody." However, despite reservations and opposition from Western powers, Kavkhazia and Drozhdania go their separate ways.

Production History

The Prisoner's Dilemma was premiered by the Royal Shakespeare Company at the Barbican Pit in 2002 under the direction of Michael Attenborough. It received its U.S. Premier at Burning Coal Theatre in Raleigh, NC in 2008.

STRIFE AND DIVISION IN THE CAUCASUS

The Caucasus region, nestled between the Black and Caspian Seas, sits right at the border between Europe and Asia. Politically, the region is separated into the Northern and Southern Caucasus. The Northern portion is contained within the Russian Federation while the Southern portion is comprised a number of independent states.

Sitting between Russia, Iran, and Turkey, the region has long been one of political and cultural rivalry. Though for most of human history, the region has fallen under Irano/Persian influence, it was conquered by the Russian Empire at the beginning of the 19th century. It is believed the Georgia is the original home of wine production.

During the Soviet era, the South Caucasus was twice united into a single political unit. First as the Transcaucasian Democratic Federative Republic from April to May 1918, and as the Transcaucasian Socialist Federative Soviet Republic from March 1922 to December 1936.

Aside from Russia, the Caucasus plays host to the former Soviet Republics of Georgia, Armenia, and Azerbaijan. However, two of these nations have large autonomous portions that can be recognized or unrecognized by the International Community. Georgia has the autonomous republic known as Adjara (which is recognized) but also two small breakaway regions known as Abkhazia and South Ossetia (recognized as separate only by Russia). Azerbaijan has the de-facto (but unrecognized) state of Nagorno-Karabakh as well as the recognized autonomous Republic Nakhchivan. Russia also has had difficulty with its autonomous Republic of Chechnya in terms of central authority.

Since the breakdown of the Soviet Union, the region has been plagued by territorial disputes between these three states of the South Caucasus as well as that of the Russian Federation. Since 1988, the region has played host to no fewer that six full-scale wars over these various territorial issues. Georgia is primarily Eastern Orthodox by faith. Azerbaijan is primarily Shia Muslim, with the breakaway Republic of Nagorno-Karabakh adhering more closely to the Armenian Apostolic Church, which is also the dominant faith of Armenia.

Geopolitical map of the Caucasus Region (2008)



THE PRISONER'S DILEMMA

The situation from which this play takes its name is a system analyzed in Game theory which shows why two completely “rational” individuals may not cooperate with one another, even if it may be in their best interests to do so. Originally formulated by Merrill Flood and Melvin Drescher at the RAND Corporation in 1950, the game was formalized (and given its current name) by Albert W. Tucker later that year. In its most traditional form, it is as follows:

Two members of a criminal gang are arrested and imprisoned. Each prisoner is in solitary confinement with no means of speaking to or exchanging messages with the other. The police admit they don't have enough evidence to convict the pair on the principal charge. They plan to sentence both to a year in prison on a lesser charge. Simultaneously, the police offer each prisoner a Faustian bargain (a bargain that is not made with the best interests of the bargainer at heart). Each prisoner is given the opportunity either to betray the other, by testifying that the other committed the crime, or to cooperate with the other by remaining silent.

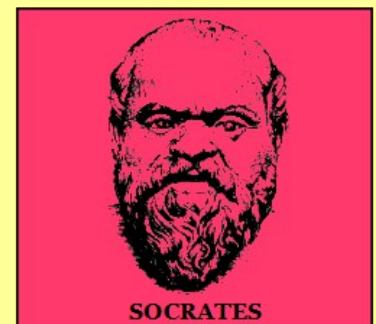
- If A and B both betray the other, each of them serves 2 years in prison
- If A betrays B but B remains silent, A will be set free and B will serve 3 years in prison (and vice versa)
- If A and B both remain silent, both of them will only serve 1 year in prison (on the lesser charge)

Let us examine this in specifics. A criminal gang consisting of Che Guevara and Socrates rob a liquor store in Davenport, Iowa. During the course of the robbery, the clerk behind the counter is shot and seriously injured. Having arrested and separated the two criminals, the police (represented by our director Jerome Davis) do not have enough evidence to convict either of them. So they make the following offer: Rat on your partner or stay silent. We can get you on the robbery charge, but we want you to testify as to who did the shooting.

Essentially, if both Che and Socrates stay silent, they will each serve one year. However, if one betrays the other they will not serve any time and the other will serve three years. If both betray the other, they will each serve two years. Since neither one is in contact with the other, logic would dictate that betrayal is the best option. Since they are being kept from talking to one another, they are both led to betray, which is NOT the best option for them both. (The absolute best for both would be for both to remain silent.)

There is also an “iterated” version of the prisoner's dilemma where the problem is repeated with the same prisoners over and over again, but each party remembers the actions of the other. This version is also called the “War/Peace” version and most strongly resembles the plotline of the play. In each scene, one of the parties betrays the other (at least in terms of the rules that have been set down). At the end, we can note that the two parties simply cut through the dilemma and sit down to talk to one another. Note that they come to the 2nd worst result.

The prisoner's dilemma game can be used as a model for a number of real world situations that involve cooperation. Indeed, the seminar at the beginning of the play is a good example of how the concept is taught in schools, particularly in the fields of conflict management and international relations. However, studies have shown a bias toward cooperation (staying silent) in human populations that may not be 100% rational.



		Silent	Betray
Silent		1 yr, 1 yr	3 yr, 0 yr
	Betray	0 yr, 3 yr	2 yr, 2 yr

ADDITIONAL ACTIVITIES

- Imagine that you are the leaders of nearby Gezekhistan (which borders on Kavkhasia/Drozhdania) and you are watching the conflict play out. How might you intervene to alleviate the prisoner's dilemma? Come up with a plan that you think would be in the best interests of your country.
- Imagine that you are one of the leaders of the Finnish government after Gina Olsson reports to you about the results of the talks at her home. What steps do you next take to try and ensure the peace remains stable? How does your country stand to benefit from the outcome?
- Have your teacher set up an iterated version of the prisoner's dilemma between two groups of students. How can students maximize their scores across an indefinite number of iterations? How might they act differently if they know the number of iterations? How does the group response differ from the expected response?

DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

Preshow

- 1.) What are your expectations when approaching a play like *The Prisoner's Dilemma*? Have you ever seen a play before? Have you ever seen one at Burning Coal? How might this effect your expectations?
- 2.) When examining the set, what do you think is going to happen?
- 3.) Have you read any critical materials about this play? About this production? How does that shape your expectations?
- 4.) Brainstorm a list of ideas about being occupied. What thoughts and feelings do you think are most important in a country that is being dominated by another? Choose one idea and write a short paragraph about that idea.

Post-show

- 1.) How did the show meet your expectations? Did it live up to them? Disappoint them? What role did expectation play in your enjoyment of the show?
- 2.) David Edgar makes this play about two countries that do not exist but are very similar to countries that do. Is this convention effective?
- 3.) How many times does the prisoner's dilemma game structure play out throughout this play? How does each time differ from the others?

ADDITIONAL RESOURCES

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